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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 14 June 1981

On May 3, 1981, on WBAI radio program "In the Spirit", Lex Hixon read an excerpt from a lecture by Shih-fu (Master) Sheng-Yen entitled The Three Requirements of Ch'an Practice (see Ch'an Magazine Vol.2 #3, p.34), and asked Shih-fu to elaborate in more detail:

If you do not have faith in yourself, then not only will you not get far in the practice, but you will not succeed in anything you set out to do. The accomplishment of faith must come from your daily life experience as well as from an understanding of Buddha Dharma. Understanding of Buddha Dharma gives rise to faith in yourself because you know that Sakyamuni was originally just an ordinary sentient being, and yet he reached Buddhahood. And he said that every sentient being without exception can become a Buddha. So faith in yourself is connected with the faith that what the Buddha said must be true, that you can reach Buddhahood. From historical records, we know that many practitioners, using the methods taught by the Buddha, including the patriarchs of the Ch'an sect, attained enlightenment. The fact that you are able to practice these methods means that you can also attain enlightenment. Related to this, not only must you have faith in the Buddha, but in those who have experience, notably, your master or teacher. But it is quite a difficult thing to have 100% absolute faith in the master, or Shih-fu, upon first meeting. Likewise, it is difficult in the beginning to have the confidence that you can definitely reach Buddhahood. Only after deriving some benefit after considerable practice will you be able to have this kind of faith that you can definitely get enlightened.

That is why I do not require my students to believe in anything at the very beginning. Rather, I just give them certain methods of practice. These methods vary according to the personality and level of practice of each student. And even the same person may be given different methods at different times. Only after students have derived some benefit from using the method will they develop faith in Shih-fu. At that time whatever method I tell the student to use, he will go ahead with diligence. Then I will tell them to give up their attachments to their own life, their conceptions of themselves, and their experience. If they can do this, they will be close to the door of enlightenment.

Yet, even after faith is attained, if the student does not bring forth a great determination to reach the goal of enlightenment within a fixed period of time, then in spite of his faith, he will not derive much benefit very quickly. This type of person must put in a long time of gradual practice before he can naturally enter into a state of enlightenment. As if rowing a boat upstream, if you do not keep on increasing your efforts, then even though you may once have had an experience, not only will you make very little

progress, but there is a good chance that you may regress. But after you practice for a length of time, you may feel exhausted physically and spiritually. If you don't doze off while sitting, you find that you cannot bring yourself to exert any energy. Under these conditions, you may think: "Maybe I'll take a rest for a while. If I can't get enlightened today, then I'll try again tomorrow. If not tomorrow, anyway, eventually it will happen." This is called being lax in the practice. Thus we have a second requirement, namely, great angry determination, which is simply to put aside any consideration of your health, or your capability of pushing forward in the practice, because you are aware that, "If I don't continue practicing now, if I were to suddenly die, then I would not be able to accomplish my practice in this lifetime." With this attitude, you simply must work hard, putting aside any consideration of your own life and death. If a Ch'an practitioner does not have a very close, direct feeling that he may die at any moment, then it is difficult for great angry determination to arise. Some people, observing the way I train students in Ch'an, may think that my demands are unreasonable, especially on retreat, where I may ask them to minimize their sleeping time as much as possible. So long as you are not about to collapse, you should continue working on the method. However, some students simply cannot sustain this kind of practice. In this case, I may take a comforting, alternative approach, suggesting that they should take a good rest until they are completely recovered, and then come back and practice again. Very often, this approach also works and after sleeping, those students will practice even harder and develop great angry determination.

But for those who still cannot manage to bring up this determination, I will say that Sakyamuni Buddha dedicated himself to hard practice for six years because he wanted to save sentient beings from suffering, and after he reached Buddhahood he taught his disciples the method to practice. Likewise, the great Ch'an masters through the ages all practiced for a great length of time before they got enlightened, and they transmitted these methods and experience down to our generation. Now, passing through so many people's efforts for such a long time, you are extremely fortunate in so short a time to have come into contact with such a good method of practice. Knowing this, if you still do not practice you should feel a great sense of shame when you think of those past Ch'an masters and Buddha himself. Furthermore, your body was given to you by your parents. And during your lifetime, so many people have contributed to you in various ways. If you do not make good use of this life of yours, if you do not practice hard and get some result, you are in fact doing injustice to all those people who have given so much to you that there is no way you can repay them. Therefore you simply must work hard.

After one has given rise to great shame and developed great angry determination, we give this person a direct method to practice Ch'an, called ts'an ch'an, or "investigating Ch'an". The purpose to this method is to bring up the great doubt, the third requirement for practice. The difference between great doubt and doubt in the ordinary sense, is that great doubt is not being suspicious of anything but in fact having absolute faith in the method of practice. We use the method as a guide to ask what we originally are. The Buddha said, all sentient beings have Buddha nature. Why is it that I cannot recognize myself as Buddha? If I am not Buddha, then after all who am I? We do not try to answer these questions using our knowledge, experience or reasoning. But rather we continuously ask ourselves until all thoughts suddenly vanish, the mind and environment disappear, and we are naturally in a state of enlightenment.

NEWS ITEMS

On Sunday, June 21, Ch'an Center members and friends went on a picnic at Silvermine Lake in Harriman State Park, New York.

The Ch'an Meditation Center is now offering instruction in T'ai Chi Ch'uan on Thursday evenings and Hatha Yoga on Tuesday evenings. Call for further information.

The next weekend retreat will be held from July 10 to 12.

During his three month stay in New York this time, Master Sheng-Yen has been giving the following series of Dharma Lectures:

On the Song of Enlightenment by Yung-Chia, every Sunday at 1:00 P.M.

On the poem Faith in Mind by the third Ch'an patriarch Seng-Ts'an, during the two seven-day Ch'an retreats

On Training Ch'an Masters by Ch'an Master Chieh-Hsien, on Wednesday evenings in the Assistants Training Class.

Shih-fu (Master) Sheng-Yen will be departing for Taiwan on Sunday evening, July 26. He will return to New York at the end of October.

After the official opening of the Ch'an Meditation Center on May 10, an ever increasing number of people have been attending our Sunday activities. This is an encouraging trend.

Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. The schedule of activities are as follows:

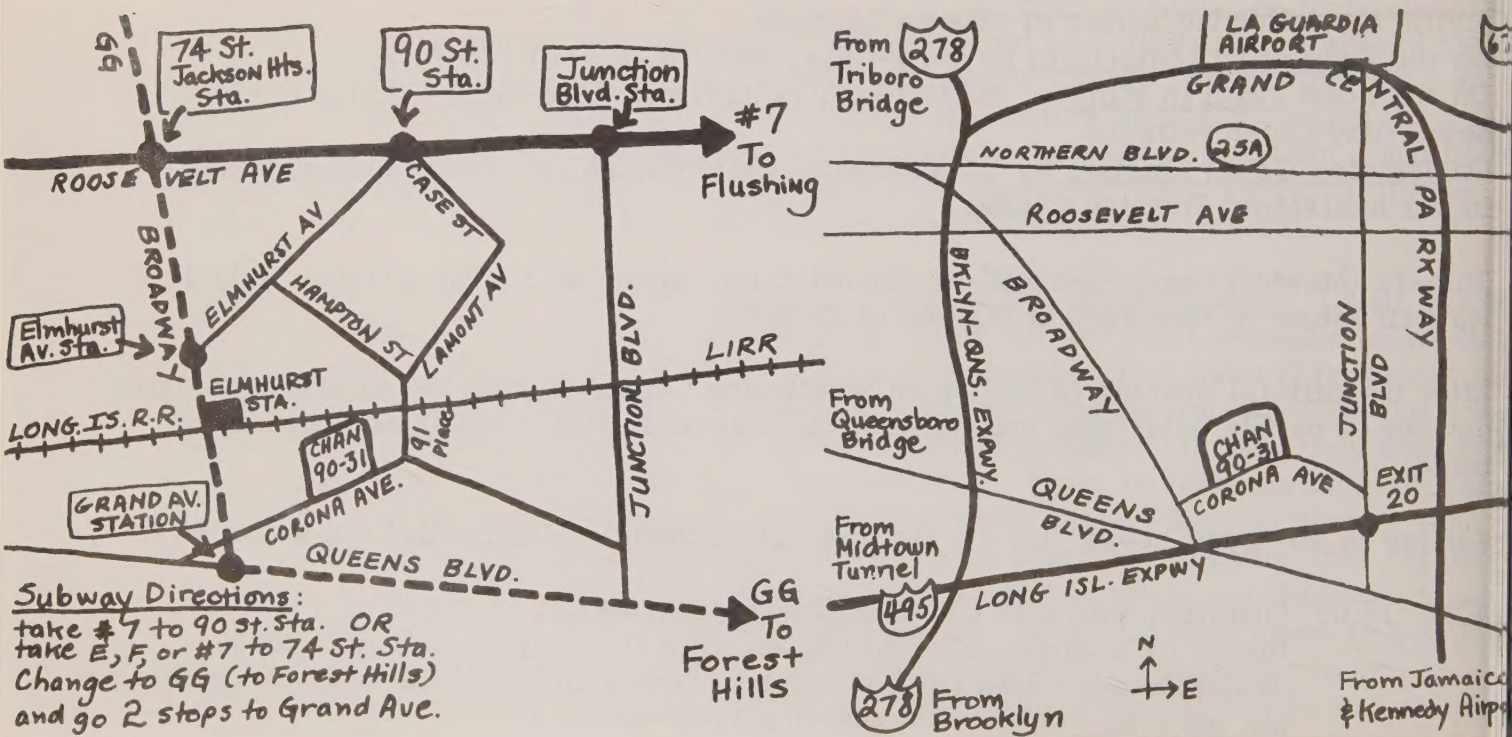
- A.M. 10:00 Chanting Sutras in Chinese (The session begins in the form of a class, taught by Shih-fu, after which we chant the chapter on Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from the Lotus Sutra. Romanization of the Chinese characters are provided for non-Chinese speaking people.)
- 11:30 Midday Offering
- P.M. 12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (\$1 contribution)
- 1:00 Dharma Lecture by Master Sheng-Yen
- 2:30 Meditation Activities, including sitting, yoga exercise, slow and fast walking, Dharma talk, and work.
- 5:00 Evening Service

For more information on Ch'an Center activities, phone (212) 592-6593, or write:

Ch'an Meditation Center
Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture
90-31 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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